

Hong Kong Students Look at the U.S.A.: American Studies in Hong Kong

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The link between Hong Kong and the two coasts in the US has had a long history that started about the same time that Hong Kong became a British colony in the mid-19th Century. All Chinese workers (or coolies) heading for the United States invariably passed through Hong Kong. Hong Kong had continued to be the intermediary between US and China workers and families in China, and even now is still continuing this function. The "1997 issue" had also allowed many Hong Kong people to immigrate to the United States. It is very common for Hong Kong people to have some close relatives that are currently living in the States. In many cases, though the United States is no longer the "golden mountain" in the material sense, it continues to be the "golden mountain" in the spiritual sense for many people who still embrace the ultimate ideal of democracy, free speech, etc. (Vicki, 2nd-year student)¹

I remember that in the opening of the movie Jerry Macguire it said, "America still sets the pace for the rest of the world." To some extent I think this is very true. People in Hong Kong still look up to the United States a lot, I think. I took this course out of an admiration for America. America and American literature are very intriguing.

For one thing, American literature is read all over the world. For another, the history, geography, politics, etc. are different from that of Hong Kong. Therefore, studying it would add to our “intellectual bank.” However different it is, I think learning about America can help us as Hong Kong people. (Tommy, 2nd-year student)

Introduction: Importance of Student Perspectives

Student opinions are an important and often overlooked source of evidence of continuity and change in Hong Kong identity, the influences of “Americanization” in Hong Kong, and the relevance of American studies in the post-1997 era. The above comments made by second-year students in American studies courses at the University of Hong Kong are among the most positive and intellectually savvy of any about the importance of studying the United States, but they are by no means isolated comments because students at the university are increasingly aware of their unique status at the gateway between cultures and nations.

As students negotiate their individual paths at the University of Hong Kong and in the larger community, they are constantly taking stock of differences between themselves and “others” across the border on the mainland, and in Taiwan, Britain, Japan, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Much has been written in recent years about changes in Hong Kong identity, but it is too early to make even guarded generalizations about the effects of the transition of sovereignty to the PRC—People’s Republic of China. Ackbar Abbas cautions that “of all the binarisms that keep things in place, perhaps the most pernicious in the Hong Kong context is that of East and West. This is not to say that there are no differences, but that the differences are not stable, they migrate, metastasize.”² Abbas and other scholars in Hong Kong cultural studies are searching for metaphors that move beyond dualistic notions of difference to describe what is happening in Hong Kong.

Yet American studies students, despite a familiarity with postcolonial critiques of the East meets West cliché, continue to find the East/West metaphor useful. They see themselves as “in between” in tangible ways, many of which will be discussed briefly in this article. These students are not always comfortable with this posture, at times wishing they were more fully on the Western side of the gate and at times yearning to be completely on the Chinese side or somewhere else entirely. As Abbas asserts, “the Hong Kong Chinese are now culturally and politically quite distinct from mainlanders: two peoples separated by a common ethnicity.”³

Those of us who have the opportunity to work with Hong Kong students find that their viewpoints challenge us to tailor our pedagogy and curriculum to a unique and fluid set of circumstances. As teachers in the only American studies program in Hong Kong, we⁴ are engaged in ongoing evaluations of our program, and one of the most important aspects of this process is learning from and about

our students. At the same time, we believe that listening to these student voices has significance beyond what we are doing in the University of Hong Kong American studies classroom. View this group as you will—a sample of youth culture in Asia and beyond; a pool of potential Hong Kong civil servants; a growing group of consumers; a harbinger of the effects of market forces and westernization on the Mainland; a bridge between East and West; or a link between the United States and China—listening to what they have to say, and they have plenty to say, is enlightening.

The American studies program itself consists of three years of required courses that build from general interest courses during the first year to a foundational course at the second year (largely based on history and literature) and a concluding course on American institutions in the third year. Along with these required courses, students take a variety of electives not only in the American studies program but also in participating departments. This 250-student program, doubling in size in each of the past four years, provides an interesting alternative for students in this historically British-based institution. The University of Hong Kong, arguably the premier university in the city, is modeled on the British university system, rather than the American one (this is, however, undergoing change). Although it is a public university, along with all other universities in Hong Kong, it sets its own standards of admission, which are very high. During the past few years, however, some of the very best students have gone abroad to universities in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States.

The students in the program are mostly young adults in their late teens and early twenties. With the exception of one student from Britain, all of the students speak Cantonese as their first language, and while there is a range of English fluency in speaking and written work, most are considerably more comfortable communicating in Cantonese, which they do routinely outside of class. Some speak Mandarin (the favored alternative for the people and government authorities in the PRC), although many do not and struggle to know which “second” language to master—English or Mandarin. All (except the British student) are ethnically Chinese and were born in Hong Kong or moved with families from the PRC during their childhood. Approximately 50 percent of the students at the University of Hong Kong live in government subsidized housing with parents, siblings, and often grandparents. Many students commute to the university from some distance, travelling from suburbs in Kowloon and the New Territories. Nearly all the students are the first in their family to attend university. As American studies is currently housed in the Faculty of Arts, which is nearly 75 percent female, several students (often male) from the Faculty of Social Sciences are enrolled in the program, thus helping to balance the gender relationship.

All of the students grapple with issues of identity. They, like university students in the United States, seek educational, social, political, and professional development in the context of many changes in the political and socio-cultural

environment. In addition to questions of the politics of post-1997 Hong Kong, the Asian economic crisis (now into its second year) is another cause for anxiety for university students. As we worked to finish this article, the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade ignited protests in several Chinese cities, including Hong Kong, and our American studies students expressed concern about how we, as students and teachers in “the only American studies program in Hong Kong,” were going to respond to the issue.⁵

At the pedagogical level, then, we find that the changes in Hong Kong provide us with an opportunity to consider questions of change and identity. American studies essays, which focus on placing student reactions to texts in conversation with their own lives, are unlike other writing assignments they have encountered in their schooling. Because most have been educated in a system that stresses memorization of facts, they struggle to make connections between readings and their thoughts on gender, race, ethnicity, economic change, generational tension, and political ideology.

Through their writing, students expand their critical thought processes; contextualize readings, music, and visual materials in light of their own experience; and, perhaps most importantly, participate in a safe forum to negotiate their way between the interdependent cultures of Hong Kong, China, and the United States. Here we will focus specifically on their views of the United States. (We freely admit, though, that the questions of an American identity are very involved with their own personal, regional, national, and ethnic identities. The United States is only one factor in a complex “system of relations,” and to find out about America is to interrogate their attitudes to all of these other aspects.) Often we find that we learn the most about how students perceive the United States (and to a lesser extent, Canada) and the future of Hong Kong/China and U.S. relationships when we have asked them to talk about something else. The information we present here is based primarily on autobiographical essays written by our first-year students in our introductory survey courses, “America at Century’s End,” and “Reading the American Dream,” though comments from second-year students come from a course, “American Literature,” that presents a range of materials from early to modern American literature.

A Word about American Studies in Hong Kong

As teachers, we engage in frequent and lively debate—or set of debates—about what American studies is and how it should be taught outside the United States. Like the debates in most American studies departments and on the H-AMSTUDY website, the diversity of opinion often reflects differences in approach, background, and ideology. Because our American studies program is a relatively young and small (but rapidly growing) enterprise in Hong Kong, we struggle for financial resources while negotiating relationships with colleagues in various disciplines from the University of Hong Kong, Fulbright Scholars, United States Information Service personnel, and members of the local commu-

nity. Some individuals believe we should focus on all that is good about American culture, literature, history, and policy. Others seek to integrate revisionism in scholarship and critiques of U.S. policy, lifestyle, and popular culture that individuals more comfortable in the first group construe as an exercise in anti-American studies.

To avoid either extreme, our program seeks a middle ground trying to keep abreast of the latest scholarship and debates in the domain of U.S.-based American studies while considering the very real needs of our students. A significant portion of our time is spent helping students strengthen their spoken and written English skills while developing a critical perspective from which to consider the United States as well as Hong Kong and China. Although we may not always succeed, we try to deepen and contextualize students' existing knowledge of American culture, most of which is drawn from Hollywood movies, popular music and music videos, U.S. news and television programs, consumption of goods with American labels, and tales from friends and family who have traveled or emigrated to the United States.

Students enroll in American studies for a variety of reasons. Some are planning to emigrate from Hong Kong. Others wish to learn more about the United States, compare it with their own experience in Hong Kong, improve their English skills, and have a taste of "American-style" teaching. Many students find the more informal atmosphere of the American studies classroom to their liking, although others are uncomfortable with the informality. We require more class participation than other lecturers do, and we introduce students to interdisciplinarity and team teaching at every level of the program. However, for as much as we would like to believe that students take our courses because they like what we do, reality checking is a daily activity for us all. Frankly, many students want to know how the United States got such power and wealth in such a short period of time. Their curiosity stems from pragmatism about how to survive in and produce for a global market dominated by U.S. policy and culture.

Although we spend a significant amount of time discussing the pitfalls of labels, stereotypes, and generalizations, and, although we problematize such terms as "America," "The American Dream," "Asia," and "Asian Values," these terms do serve to locate substantial issues for students. We have also found that no matter how much time we spend telling students that they cannot generalize about individuals, groups, and cultures, they happily do just that in their essays. By the second or third year they become more savvy at masking or qualifying their generalizations, but it is interesting and instructive to listen to the categories the students construct to frame their perspectives, and to the way students label themselves and others, though we recognize that some of their comments may be to satisfy their instructors.

Climate of Opinion in Hong Kong

Student attitudes reveal clues to a number of issues including Hong Kong identity, the usefulness of American studies in their post-university lives, and economic realities that have become bleaker as a result of the recent Asian financial crisis. Of course, one of the primary reasons to study the United States is to gain more diverse perspectives on the world:

Studying American culture and history is interesting for many reasons, not the least of which is that it adds a new perspective to life. From this perspective it is possible to see things that cannot be viewed from a monolingual or monocultural angle.
(Benjamin)

To read the US in Hong Kong is beneficial to me to enrich my knowledge. To me, it really helps me to think of my cultural identity. Before 1997, Hong Kong was a colonial city. I strongly hope that reading the US can help me to understand the culture and history of America more . . . [as well as] world history more. (Ying)

Although most students value increased cultural perspectives, nearly all are concerned about what their future holds in light of changes in the local and international economic situation. As faculty, we believe that some newly articulated resistance to interdisciplinarity may be linked to worries that every course in college needs to translate into employment skills:

. . . There are so many uncertainties during our time. Just when we are preparing ourselves for our future career, the economy is on the greatest decline in years. There is no guarantee that we, the future university graduates, will be able to find jobs, not to mention being able to have promising jobs. There are also many political uncertainties. (Olivia)

Economic status is the greatest advantage we [Hong Kong people] have. If we are not so outstanding in our economic and financial markets, we have nothing to fight against the Chinese government and we may now become a more communist place.
(Cheryl)

Keeping in mind, then, some of the factors shaping student opinion, we turn to a consideration of the refracted image of the United States in the narratives students write.

Student Perspectives on Reading the United States

The following themes emerge from over 150 first- and second-year student essays and comments within the last two years. For the sake of brevity we have selected excerpts from essays that most clearly articulate what many other students have said on the same subject. Although we draw primarily from first-year essays, we see the same themes echoed among second- and third-year students. The comments, by no means unanimously positive or negative, come from students' personal engagement with the instructors, ideas about the courses, and interaction with various members of the American community in Hong Kong. With very few exceptions, these students have not visited the United States or traveled in Asia. Most have never been to mainland China. Like Richard Pells,⁶ we believe the United States that foreigners (in this case students from the University of Hong Kong) consequently experience at a distance is one that has been transformed according to the local culture and, indeed, may have affected the students' lives in only minor ways. The images are, nevertheless, strongly realized, and the attitudes very significant.

• *Respect for American Students*

Many students are interested in how U.S. students think about issues of identity. An e-mail exchange, coordinated by American studies faculty at the University of Iowa gives our students a chance to query "real live Americans" about their feelings. Most of the Hong Kong students are surprised that their initial stereotypes of U.S. students do not hold. Many express surprise that U.S. students are studying hard, are members of large families and interested in them, and are respectful of their elders as well as patriotic. In addition, many compare their own sense of loyalty to nation with the Iowa students' perceived patriotism:

From the e-mail exchange, I realize that many of the students in the University of Iowa love the US very much. The last time I asked one of them about what subjects or faculties are the most popular among the universities in the US, and whether the subjects tend to be those which can offer them a better occupation. His reply is that there is no such thing as "popular subjects" as the US, unlike Hong Kong, gives them all sorts of opportunities to get into a profession they want to be in, regardless of how weird it may be. This is the benefit of living in the US. Another student from the University of Iowa posts a message stating that he loves the US's emphasis on sports. He says this is what he thinks is unique about the US. I can't say whether they are being patriotic, but at least they are able to tell that they LOVE living in this country, and there's some-

thing special about this country that makes them feel good to be involved in it. This is good enough. Somehow I think there is something unique about Hong Kong too. I appreciate my exposure to different cultures and different languages. Hong Kong has become a place where I am happy to stay. I don't want to care about whether she is a country or not. I just know that I BELONG to this city. (Nicolecher)

Everyone in the world is unique and has her or his own identity. People can define their identity by their ethnicity. The student voices reflect that there are different identities among Americans. Even though many are not white Americans, they are sure of who they are. They are proud to be American. They do not deny their own nation. However, in Hong Kong people also have different identities but their nationalistic feeling is not as great as in America. It may be due to the rule of colonial government. (Christina)

Although we unpack notions that the United States was founded under special circumstances and has maintained a particular set of values and traditions that make it “exceptional,”⁷ Hong Kong students see the American students as different than other nationalities, and they like what they see. Many believe that, rather than unpacking or criticizing American exceptionalism, Hong Kong people should seek to bolster their own sense of who they are and what makes them unique. Many write about wanting to inspire in their families and communities a kind of Hong Kong exceptionalism! Others, however, are critical of such exclusivity in both cases and see Hong Kong and the United States as sharing a similar global space:

*The question I would like to ask is whether Hong Kong people are now freed from the refugee mentality and the ideology of Exceptionalism? I am afraid not. This is because all of these historical realities are very deeply rooted in the minds of Hong Kong people, not to mention the fact that there is always a lack of confidence as to whether the **one country, two systems** is going to work without interference from our motherland. I would therefore say that the handover of sovereignty in 1997 has not favored, at least at this stage, the establishment of a clear identity of Hong Kong people. The problem of identity exists not only in Hong Kong. Following a process of globalization and multiculturalism, it is said that Americans are wrestling with the problem of identity. Through*

an e-mail exchange with students of the University of Iowa, I have had the chance to observe a bit about the views of the American students on the issue of U.S. identity. Both Hong Kongers and our Iowa friends are living in a quickly changing world. All of us are facing a mosaic of global influences including economic and political changes, scientific discoveries, mass media, information technologies and so on. I believe there is still a need for us to seek answers to many of these questions including "Who Am I?" (Sylvia)

Further elaborating on exceptionalism, this student returns again to the discussion of Hong Kong identity and the financial crisis:

In Hong Kong, people used to be proud of themselves. Yet the so-called "Hong Kong Exceptionalism" has been lapsing in these years, in light of keen competition from the elite mainlanders. Economic downturn after the Asian financial crisis further depletes our superiority, which is mainly based on our economic success. (Sylvia)

• **Concern About American Educational Methods**

Many students in Hong Kong believe that American educational methods comprising informal dialogue in the classroom, interdisciplinary approaches, and multi-media presentations are too extreme. Although there are those at the University of Hong Kong who like an American studies approach, others are less certain about the use of film, music, and interdisciplinary teaching approaches.

I interviewed my friend who has lived in America for three years . . . He is now staying in Hong Kong for holidays. He lives very far away from his school. Every day he goes to school by car. The teaching style is completely different from Hong Kong. It is easier to enter the university in his state; therefore the stress on studying is less. The teacher usually uses an active method in teaching students. When they are having history lessons, they usually watch videotapes, pictures or listening to music. They usually discuss the topic between classmates during the lesson more than lecture. My friend tells me that there is a smell of America in the classroom. (Joe)

Joe's focus on teaching style is interesting. In our American studies classrooms at the University of Hong Kong we have tried to provide a balance between

American styles of interactive teaching and the reliance on lecturing generally expected in Hong Kong. Although relating the experience of his friend in the United States, Joe is himself making up his mind about different styles of teaching and education. The “smell of America in the classroom” may be more pleasant for some students than others.

• *The United States Is Important for its Views on Freedom*

In considering American institutions, instructors systematically explore the tenets of underlying ideology and the development of U.S. societal characteristics. Many students identify with larger American ideological perspectives and political issues like freedom, but these are not universally perceived as positive. Students generally approve of Americans being free under the law, but they often question such issues as freedom of speech extending to racial slurs, American involvement in world affairs, and uses of freedom leading to unpleasantness, confrontation, and even violence. Students try to gauge just what freedom means in the context of the United States and how it differs from their experience in Hong Kong and in the lives of friends and family members.

Since the U.S. has a close relationship with Hong Kong, in terms of economy, politics, etc. . . . The U.S. is believed to be a leading country of “freedom,” so I would like to find out how “free” the U.S. is from my reading of American literature.
(Max)

[My father’s] American dream was confirmed by last year’s visit to the U.S. and Canada. Both countries seem to be an ideal place for living with a clean environment and polite people. The Statue of Liberty seems to represent freedom and liberty to pursue any possibilities for self-development. That is why my father is proud to take photos in front of the statue. (Anna)

• *The United States Sets the Pace for Global Consumer Goods and Style of Life.*

Hong Kong students consume American fashion, Coke, McDonald’s hamburgers, Kentucky Fried Chicken, American music and films, Disney and Warner Brothers merchandise, and Microsoft computer programs, to list only a few. Many believe that the tide of westernization represented by these products changes as the times change. Some consider Western commodities part of the many options in their daily dim sum, but others see consumption of U.S. popular culture as linked to times in their lives when they were less sure of themselves.

My schoolmates [returned overseas-Chinese girls] were worshipped for their taste for American food, clothes and music,

as well as their sportsmanship and creativity. I, a pudgy bookworm, had none of these attributes and didn't mix with them either. I just didn't have the "gwaimuijai (white girl) temperament." It was interesting to see how strong this tide of westernization was, even in a place where Chinese were the majority. We shunned local movies, local food, and went for foreign movies, pizza and chips, magazines like Seventeen, brown hair and green contact lenses. Perhaps it was the novelty of it, or maybe looking un-Chinese was the way to go. After all, "the June Fourth Incident" was still haunting most of us. (Abigail)

[In junior high school] I met a group of peers who spent most of their childhood in place in North America like Toronto, Florida, and Los Angeles . . . Then I started to see things from their points of view. That is, I learned to speak "cool," learned to laugh out loud, and learned to play hard. I did find these people "cool". . . . Also, I coveted their clothing, their Nikes and Reeboks so much that I wanted to become more like them. (Gene)

• ***Positive Views of American Individualism and Energy***

One of the primary positive stereotypes emerging from the students' conceptions of the United States is that Americans are energetic, active, and outgoing, marked by a strong sense of individuality and individualism. For the most part these qualities are seen as positive, but the opposite view appears as well. In considering various readings and discussions about the Civil Rights Movement, protests against the war in Vietnam, and women's issues in the 1960s and 1970s, many students strongly identify with the student activism, believing that they fundamentally created a more diverse, less complacent, and more energetic American society.

I appreciate Americans' energy, intelligence and guts. . . . I wish I could be one of the activists of the student movement in America in the 1960s. I wish I had their passions, energies and visions. I could organize something big and meaningful. And maybe I could bring them some different ideas about certain issues too. (Dick)

Americans are individualistic, they have a dislike for rules and they are assertive, whereas Chinese are the opposite; they feel obligation to the group, accept rules and are passive. (Cately)

• *Admiration for the Courage of American Women*

Opinions about women and gender issues are difficult to categorize. Like American men, American women are seen as assertive and individualistic, and many of the students view this role as positive. Others express concern that the women's movement in the United States has been anti-male and dismissive of traditional notions of women's roles. Although there are exceptions, most male students are less interested in, or resistant to, discussions of women's history and feminism than are female students. Female students are more likely to express views that are sympathetic to feminism, and they are more thoughtful about how gender role expectations will influence their future.

I refuse to live a nameless life, being a faceless woman. Maintaining awareness sometimes brings misery, but it is worthwhile. When I read about the history of the American women's movement,⁸ I was moved. Who wouldn't like to live in a big house and have stable and happy lives? Who would be so stupid to give all these things up and start a war? But sometimes stability might prevent change and limit choice, which could lead to tragedy. The most tragic thing is that, you don't know that you are already victimized. You never know that you have choices. (Joyce)

• *Cynical Views about Access to American Life*

Although American men and women are viewed positively in their pragmatism, business acumen, and emphasis on equal rights, many students believe that life is easiest for the white male and that access to American life for others comes at a high price. This price is exacted in many ways, but for Asians who immigrate to the United States, it means that they are expected to work and study hard, accumulate material wealth, and remain uninvolved in American political issues.

Being a "banana"⁹ is the easiest way to success in the US. The reason why discrimination against Asians is relatively less than other races is that they are considered hard-working people, just studying and causing no harm to Whites so they got to be a model minority. I think it is not very comfortable to live in the US if you are not a white male. (Hitomi)

• *American Families in Crisis*

The term "Asian values" has become a convenient shorthand in Asia much the way "Family values" has in the United States. After investigating the sharp rise in American women's employment during and after World War II and changes in the nature of the American family in the second half of this century,

many students declare that when both men and women consider themselves as equal and want equal access to the workplace, there will be difficulties. Most of the women who talk about gender and family issues declare, to a greater or lesser extent, that they are eager to have careers and families and to do things differently from their mothers, while the boys are much keener to preserve “traditional Chinese or Asian values.”

I treasure my family life. I love my family members and put strong emphasis on maintaining good relationships among them. This strong sense of belonging is due to the very good examples set by my parents. Their unconditional love and concern towards the family made the home the first and most suitable place for me to learn how to love and care about other people. It was shocking for me to discover that, by 1990, half of all US marriages ended in divorce and that one fourth of the nation's children are being raised in single-parent households. It seems to me that there is a disintegration of families in America. The family values have totally changed and the consequences could be disastrous for society. (Dick)

• **Americans as too Extreme**

Although seeing America as the crucible for change in politics, social relations, and technology, Hong Kong students generally believe that U.S. culture places too great an emphasis upon extreme actions. These include unrestrained individualism, disregard for family, and violence.

Maybe due to the fact that I am Chinese, I prefer the Chinese ways. They are more moderate and conservative and make me feel more secure. Americans always give me an impression that they are always going too far. When they are against a certain tradition, they totally abandon it. Then they will start it over again until they found themselves going too far the other way. Then they undergo a certain backlash. They always fail in maintaining the balance. This generation always feels uncomfortable with the previous generation. They seem not to have a dependable tradition and they find it hard to establish one. They have no roots but dreams. (Dick)

• **Concern About U.S. Ignorance of Hong Kong, Asia, and Economic Issues**

One student interviewed a friend in the United States as required in the course. He was surprised, and a bit upset, that the U.S. student did not know about the Asian financial crisis. This comment highlights a general concern that the

United States wants to establish its economic and cultural presence abroad but that its people know little about the values and characteristics of other countries.

At first I thought that citizens in the US must be very fond of this topic (economic issues) since they are so rich and prosperous. Surprisingly, however, he does not know much! He could only tell me some very superficial things. He even told me that he did not know about the Asian economic crisis. From this I can conclude that Josh is ignorant about the crisis because he is living in a strong, energetic country, which makes him feel he has no need to think about many things concerning money.
(Woo Lai)

Post-1997 Hong Kong Identity

Many students write about their preference to be identified as Hong Kong people rather than Chinese, even after the change of sovereignty. There has been, however, a change of viewpoint on the question of identity. Nearly two years have passed since Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. In certain respects this is too short a period to speculate on changing views of Hong Kong identity and relations with mainland China and international communities, but it also marks an appropriate moment to explore students' perceptions of the United States.

The following section focuses on comments drawn from essays written by 140 first-year students (as opposed to the previous sections dealing with first- and second-year students) during the spring and fall terms of 1998 in order to capture opinions that have been less directly mediated by experiences in university culture and American studies courses. Most of the first-year responses indicate that, although students are negotiating their identity in different ways, they have been thinking and talking about it with family members and friends. They are candid about how they see themselves in relation to their compatriots on the mainland:

Though I am not a blonde with shining blue eyes, I was holding a BNO,¹⁰ I was living under the rule of the British government, and I was growing up in a Britainized, or at least westernized place, so I was British. And I enjoyed that. . . . So, when people began the handover countdown, to me, it was like the countdown to Armageddon. And when my parents suggested going on a vacation in Thailand at the time of the handover, my younger sister and I were thrilled to go. . . . We just did not want to witness the handover, we did not want to be part of this cruel fact. But after I came back from my vacation, something began to change. People around me were talking about the handover.

Some were saying how lucky they were to witness this “big” historical event. Some even came to Hong Kong solely for the handover. Suddenly, I realized that I missed a thing, an important thing that is influential to Hong Kong. Since then, I have begun to ask myself the question, “Who am I?” (Gloria)

Even after the 1997 handover, it is still hard to change from calling ourselves “HK people” to “pure Chinese” because we get used to it. . . . Moreover, we see ourselves as exceptional from those Mainland Chinese. We always place our ethnic identity above national identity. (Irene)

Many discuss their progression from being ashamed of their “Chineseness” to being comfortable or proud of it in their recent past. Student reactions vary, as does the length of time their families have lived in Hong Kong, but they have certainly become more savvy about their critiques of colonialism, and they seem to be more willing to discuss their views of identity. Some of the students are reluctant to embrace a new political identity, but accept their obligations to Hong Kong society:

I think most of us are proud of being Hong Kong people since Hong Kong is a famous international financial center. However, we may not be so proud of being Chinese, especially after the handover. I guess what we need is time to develop a sense of belonging to the nation. After all, the colonial influence was so great. At least we are proud of being Hong Kong citizens. We do like this community. . . . I don’t ask which place is good for me to live anymore. I simply ask what I can do where I am. Even if we are not so sure what our identity is, we should still perform our own duties and roles well.¹¹ (Janet)

Not only are students interrogating their place in the new SAR, they are more open in calling for political change. One student writes:

. . . We are now a colony of China. I can tolerate a governor sent by the British Government to set some laws or policies I don’t like, since he is a foreigner and he did not know much about HK. But as a citizen of HK, I sincerely hope Hong Kong people can administrate HK by ourselves, by electing the chief executive on our own, but not someone chosen by the PRC government like Tung Chee Wah. . . . In the late 80s and 90s there are legislators who are chosen by HK people, but their power is not great enough to fight for rights for us. The legislators are not

great enough to have a say between the British and Chinese government. We feel that those two governments are trading us. (Cheryl)

Another student expresses similar feelings of frustration at the way Hong Kong has been, and continues to be, positioned between powerful nations:

Unfortunately, we are living in one of the busiest cities in the world. People may have no sense of awareness of the importance of self-identity. We are just like a tennis ball which is being hit between China and the U.K. The British have played a main role in the development of this city but their major purpose was largely economic. They focus on Hong Kong, but also on opening the market to the Mainland so it is not just the influence of the US but also colonialism. Children have not received any knowledge of nationalism through their education. How can we understand who we are as we are actually forced to carry both languages at the same time, English at school and Chinese at home? This system does not exist in most of the developed countries such as the USA. Therefore, our generation is not guided by both our parents and the society. British have seen us as moneymakers, the more that we focus on money, the less on the nationalism and the possibility of rebellion. (Jimmy)

One student speaks candidly about his disillusionment with Hong Kong:

Many people say that Hong Kong is cosmopolitan. People from all over the world come here to live and to work. However, what I can see is that Hong Kong is not really so cosmopolitan. For example, on Sundays, nearly all of the Filipino maids gather in Central. They can still stay in other places, but Hong Kong people do not seem to welcome them very much. Foreigners, especially those who come from the West, drink and have fun in Lan Kwai Fong. Indo-Pakistanis live in the Chung Hing Building in Tsim Tsa Tsui. These are all segregated groups, although it is not by constitution or by law. It is a kind of segregation that most people in Hong Kong have unconsciously accepted. But a cosmopolitan city should be a place where different kinds of people can merge peacefully. But this is not the case in Hong Kong; people of different colors are not equal. (Victor)

• *Hong Kong Students and Asian Americans*

Over the past several years, no one area of interest is so consistently at the forefront of student reflections as Asian-American studies. Although most Hong Kong students are uncomfortable seeing themselves labeled simply as “Chinese,” they are, almost unanimously, opposed to seeing Chinese-Americans as “real Americans.”

Emotionally, I see the Asian Americans as Asians. Even though these Asian Americans were born in the U.S. their outlook cannot be changed. It's quite difficult for me to accept them to be real Americans. For example, the tennis player, Michael Chang. He thinks he is an American, he never thinks that he is Chinese. However, every time people in Hong Kong see him in the tennis match, we would want him to be the winner. Because we emotionally think that he is Chinese. His ethnicity is Chinese forever. We would like Chinese to be the winner. However, Chang never thinks of himself as Chinese. . . . However, I think the Asian Americans have their own freedom to choose their identity. If they want to be an Asian, then be an Asian. If they want to be an American, then to be an American. . . . However, once we are still in Hong Kong, we are still Chinese! I hope that people in Hong Kong would start to respect their own country—China. (Jessica)

Through Barney [a U.S. citizen the student interviewed] I have come to know about the identity of an American born Chinese man in the United States. My impression of Barney is that he is a Chinese who has been totally Americanized. He identifies himself as an American and he feels comfortable to say that he is proud of his country. Many of us, our parents' generation in particular, consider that it is wrong for American born Chinese to be totally Americanized. They should speak their native Chinese dialect or the Puthonghua [Mandarin]; they should use chopsticks and remember all Chinese festivals. Barney probably believes that to live an American life does not mean that he will ignore the fact that he is Chinese by race. He was born to be an American and he is going to do what other Americans are doing in his society. I am of the opinion that assimilation into the culture of the mainstream of a country is necessary if one intends to live comfortably, happily and harmoniously with other people in the same society. Apparently Barney is a happy American. (Sylvia)

In the passage above, Sylvia, who is older than many of the other students in her class, considers her own identity as well as that of Barney. Often, Hong Kong students look to American-born Chinese students as examples of those who are like and not like them. They are interested in seeing how “ABCs” (American-born Chinese) work through their own identity issues.

As a Hong Kong person, I am exposed to all kinds of culture. However, for some reason, I don't feel like I belong to my mother country—China. I just simply don't have that sense of belonging towards her. In this respect, I think my situation is quite similar to some of the Asian Americans in the US. The only difference would be that I live in a place which belongs to my mother country, while the Asian Americans don't. (Nicolecher)

Some other students admire those Asian Americans who assimilate while comparing U.S. and Hong Kong experiences and wondering how pride and patriotism differ in each place:

Andrea likes the Declaration of Independence very much. She, as an Asian American doesn't feel that her right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have been taken away. In fact, she really feels that the States is a place of freedom, liberty and equality. She thinks that the Federal Government doesn't discriminate against non-whites. What really touched me is that Andrea always feels proud, happy and delighted every National Day, not because of the sales at Bloomingdale's or Nordstrom, but because she is an American. This touched my heart and made me think of a weird but real question, “Why are there some people in Hong Kong who aren't proud, but who are ashamed of being Chinese?” (Glory)

The “June 4th incident,” that is, the date of the tragic conclusion at Tianamin Square of the student democracy movement in China, looms large in their childhood conceptions of the PRC. However, within the last several years, as efforts were made to prepare Hong Kong for the transition to PRC rule, students have visited China, studied Chinese history and culture, begun studying Mandarin, and, while still very engaged with “things Western” or “American,” shown more ease with the idea of their link to the Mainland. The importance of parents' and grandparents' viewpoints is paramount here. If the family came to Hong Kong because of persecution and loss of property in China either during the Communist triumph in 1949 or the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, their attitudes are

more likely to be negative than if it came either very recently or well before 1949.

Actually, parental experience influences me on the issues of language and identity. In order to be westernized in linguistic terms, I take courses in English and Putonghua. I speak with a Taiwan but not a Beijing accent. I would rather be labeled as a Hong Kong person or even Canadian in the future, instead of Chinese (Anna)

Being a Hong Kong person is quite confusing. Our traditional values are based on Chinese society, but obviously Hong Kong people do not like the communist regime; Hong Kong has been a British colony for over a century. We hated the feeling of being colonized and controlled. But at the same time, we enjoyed our economic prosperity, educational system and freedom. Although now China has regained the sovereignty of Hong Kong, in our mind, there are not only the traditional Chinese values here but also the cultures from the West. Hong Kong is a melting pot between the East and the West. There are always contradictions when identifying ourselves. For example, when we are asked what nationality we belong to, some people may say they are Chinese, while some of them will say they are British, and some would like to say they are Hong Kong people. There exists more than one answer to the question. Many people are confused, they do not know who they are. I would say that I am definitely a Hong Kong person, not because I am living in Hong Kong but because of the way I live here and the cultural background that I possess. (Horace)

• ***Feelings of Inadequacy Concerning Red Guards and Tiananmen Square***

Some of the students' families had their property confiscated and lost their professional positions and social standing during the Cultural Revolution and consequently came to regard China as cruel, capricious, tyrannical, and despotic. Although students at the University of Hong Kong have no direct knowledge of these times, stories have been handed down in families, and many of the grandparents and parents nurse old grudges against the Communist leadership and continue to view the Chinese government with suspicion. Equally traumatizing for many was the "June 4th Incident" in which students seemed to be the victims of a government crackdown of the freedom movement. The transition to the PRC in 1997 was thus emotionally trying with a great deal of uncertainty for

some families. Though many have found new reasons to affirm their Chinese heritage, they have mixed feelings.

Just like the encounter of Wong Chun Yau mentioned in Asian Americans,¹² my maternal grandfather, who was an intellectual and a land owner, was purged and rebuked by the Red Guards. Being classified by the government as one of those pursuing capitalism, all of the property of my maternal grandfather was confiscated, and he was even expelled from the hospital. . . . After a period of introspection, I ultimately ascertained that my feeble sense of patriotism and predisposition to call myself a Hong Kong local instead of a Chinese were partly shaped by personal family background as well as the history of China. (Irene)

I want to celebrate and love the Chinese tradition. Especially when I know more, I found that China is not so bad. When I saw the movie "The Gate of Heavenly Peace," I know that Chinese Government is not the only reason of the failure of the 1989 Movement. (Wendy)

• ***Developing Pride in Being Chinese***

Following the June Fourth Incident at Beijing, many Hong Kong students did not want to identify with their Chinese heritage. As China furthered economic reforms, became more open to international influences, and welcomed visitors from Hong Kong and abroad, some of the students, however, have taken advantage of the opportunity to travel to the mainland and have liked what they have seen. Even those who lack the opportunity to travel to China have experienced a change in attitude, overlooking the political implications of the handover and focusing on common ethnicity:

"Mainlanders" are regarded as poor, not well educated or even literate, bad mannered, and they wear many other labels. Hong Kong people feel that they are superior to them and, very often, look down on them. However, as I got older, I came to know that there is so much more to being "Chinese." The term to me does not only refer to nationality. It also refers to an ethnicity, one to which I belong. No matter how my nationality changes, my ethnicity will always be Chinese. (Olivia)

Despite this new affirmation of their links with mainland China, some students find that the question of ethnicity is as vexed as that of common political identity:

I have been confused about my nationality for a long time. Hong Kong is not a nation so I always have difficulty in filling out the forms, under the column of nationality. I do not know what I should write—British or Chinese. I do not want to write Chinese but I am definitely not British. In the past, I always wanted to be a Westerner and did not want to be Chinese. It was because I thought China was poor. I thought it was a weak nation. I believed the “Mainland Chinese” were not educated and were discriminated against by the foreigners. I always thought that the Westerners were superior to Chinese. Also I am living in Hong Kong which is different from China so I did not want to admit that I am Chinese. However, the hatred towards China has been fading after the handover. When I first heard the “National Song” and saw China’s flag hanging in Hong Kong on the 1st of July 1997, I started to accept that Hong Kong is part of China. Moreover, in these years, China has become more open, both in politics and economics. The image of China is changing. It is no longer weak and poor and “the sleeping dragon is awakening.” . . . So I do not hate China as I did in the past but I still cannot “fully” admit to being “pure” Chinese. (Jacqueline)

The educational background of the students often makes a difference in their perception of China, and those educated in “mother-tongue,” Chinese-speaking schools rather than English-speaking schools sometimes find their Chinese identity confirmed in special ways:

I don’t have a problem with identity issues. I don’t know why but I think I am Chinese nationally and geographically. I think this acceptance of identity of being Chinese is out of emotion. Another reason, I think I have studied in a school, which uses Chinese as the language of instruction. So feeling Chinese is a norm for me. Yet, I realize that not all the people accept the identity of being Chinese. They may think that they are “Hong Kong people” or “Chinese in Hong Kong” but not “Chinese.” . . . I think the way to solve the identity issue is education. Nowadays, many teenagers don’t accept their Chinese identity. They tend to love the foreigner’s culture and think Chinese culture is bad. So, I think we should promote not only the identity of being Chinese, but also the Chinese culture to let them know how good the Chinese culture is and how important their Chinese identity is. (Cozy)

Some clearly want to overcome their westernization and bias toward a Western critique of China and have unequivocally adopted the language and stance of patriotism:

Before 1st July 1997, I did not think I should feel like a Chinese but after that I think I should have the “obligation” to do so. I have an identity. I am no longer merely a Hong Konger but I am also Chinese. I feel I am Chinese especially when China joins the Olympic Games. . . . I will support China in wars because I think I should have a strong country to adhere to. I need to be under the protection of China. I know that China has a powerful military backup. You may say I am intermittent Chinese—I am patriotic only when China gains fame, reputation and advantage in the world. Otherwise, I still enjoy being a Hong Konger. I know trivia about the history of China. I am learning and trying to be a “true Chinese.” I will study Chinese history, ethics, philosophy, customs. . . . We Hong Kongers will learn. One day, I will be a true Chinese—I need time, trust me.
(Woo Lai)

Not everyone can make such assertions, either unqualified or qualified, about political identification with China and believe that an impossible gap exists between the social, economic, and political systems of China and the SAR (Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China).

Although Hong Kong has become part of China, even after the handover there is still a great cultural, political and social gap between the two regions. The most distinct contrast is the political and the ideological difference. Hong Kong is a capitalist city where property rights are protected by the law. China is a communist country and people in the mainland are strongly influenced by socialism. . . . The different political systems make Hong Kong become unique among the other prosperous cities in the mainland. (Sandy)

In many of the responses, students indicate a growing patriotism to China but also sense the need to question that very affirmation:

The takeover is really something new not just for Hong Kong people but for the whole world. I believe it means the rising of a new power and falling of the other. I believe I am now Chinese, not a Hong Konger. I am surely not an Englishman! What I wonder is whether the culture of Hong Kong should go which way? . . . I think it is a time for us to have a self-evaluation

*of what we did that is right and what we did that was wrong.
Especially not just for us, but for the coming generation!*
(Horace)

Although Chinese nationalism and patriotism are clearly growing among the students, many continue to believe that their Western values will assert themselves and that this is a positive development:

[After making a trip to China with my mother,] I stopped flaunting my English skills and made myself a lot less noticeable, practicing that Chinese art of moderation. . . . This sudden revival of my Chinese identity came at a time when it became “fashionable” again to talk about Chinese culture, heritage and comradeship in Hong Kong. I suppose most Hong Kong people had reconciled themselves to the fact that they were indeed going back to China and tried to make things easier for themselves. Also, the fruits of China’s Economic reform under Deng were rapidly becoming visible. . . . Even those professionals who “brain-drained” to Canada, the States, and Australia returned. All eyes were on China, and the significance wasn’t lost on the younger generation. For us, the Education Department changed the A-Level Chinese syllabus and added a Chinese Culture supplement. We flocked to learn Mandarin, sing Mandarin pop songs, visited the “Window of the World” attraction in Shenzhen.¹³ I don’t think we ever abandoned foreign pop culture for an instant, but it was true that being a Chinese became a lot more comfortable for us Hong Kong youngsters. . . . We considered ourselves smarter and more hardworking than our foreign counterparts, since we heard so many success stories about Hong Kong migrants abroad. (Abigail)

As I have grown up, I understand the difficulties faced by the Chinese government. I know that democracy cannot be given at once. Only gradual change is possible. Thus, the suppression of students on 4 June 1989 was needed from the government’s perspective. Also, I see that people and the government cannot control the poor economy of China to a certain extent. With more understanding, my hatred towards China is reducing. But, my mixed identity still exists. I believe that the mixed identity will last throughout my life. It is because I cannot deny my Chinese identity but the British identity cannot be deleted in my mind either. I hope that one day I can stop struggling and feel totally comfortable with my mixed

identity. I can live as Charles Ryu said, "I see myself as being nowhere, and that nowhere-ness has become part of my struggle." (Holy)

• ***Some Cautions about the Hong Kong Identification with China***

Although some of the students feel an increasing affinity with China, they have reservations about the perception of the international community toward the Hong Kong Chinese or of China toward them. The international community may simply view Hong Kong as a convenient point of access for the developing market of China, but China itself may view the Hong Kong Chinese as rich relatives who should support them. In either case, the Hong Kong Chinese are not viewed as important in and of themselves:

From my daily experience such as my daily contacts with others, watching television, seeing movies, etc., I have found that the Mainland Chinese would think that Hong Kong people are their rich relatives. We ought to look after them. We are all Chinese. . . . For me as a Hong Kong person, I also think that they are my relatives and I would be very willing to act as a model for them to develop and improve. I just do not want to be their money source. Westerners see us as an agent or a tunnel to get into Mainland China. We are able to manage the differences between the West and China. We are a good partner in business and culture promotion. This is quite true, however "westerners" have overlooked our pain and the price we pay. (Zoe)

Conclusion: Cultural Crosscurrents

This article has not fully addressed the significance of colonialism in Hong Kong and, consequently, how America may be perceived differently here than elsewhere. Some of the students genuinely welcome American influence as a corrective to the past legacy of British imperialism and colonial rule. Others see the United States as less committed to Hong Kong in the long run and only interested in profits in the short run, and so do not see it as an attractive alternative.

I think identity changes from time to time. The first generation in the US had no strong claim to identify themselves as American while the later generation does. In Hong Kong, the older generation claims themselves as Chinese but we identify ourselves as Hong Kong people. I believe this phenomenon will not remain unchanged. As time goes by, with the changing social structure of values, things will change accordingly. In

the US, by the mid 2000s it is predicted that whites will be a minority and immigrants and people of color from other countries will increase. Then, those Asian Americans will no longer be excluded from the mainstream. In Hong Kong, after the long period of Chinese administration, the next generation will no longer be influenced by colonial education. If China becomes a great power in the world, I think people in Hong Kong will be proud to label themselves as Chinese. (Rowena)

One student talked about American self-centeredness and how U.S. (and Hong Kong) people leave their home environments and visit other countries, in the process exhibiting “exceptionalist” behavior:

I return to the subject of . . . American’s self-centeredness. At home this psychological tendency was hardly perceptible to [my friend] when she was surrounded by other Americans. But during her visits to Senegal and Europe Beth witnessed how some of her compatriots demanded the rights to everything. When needs weren’t met, they argued relentlessly until they were satisfied. Their identity of being American overshadowed their understanding of other races. A strange empathy struck me during my visit to mainland China a few years ago. Though getting along with the same race of people with black eyes and yellow skin, I was there feeling a bit “superior” because of my status as a colonial subject. And I did try to distinguish myself from them as one who was “made in Hong Kong,” expecting envy and priority from my fellow relatives. To me, and to anyone else, that sounds nothing but naïve and that’s what Americans and Hong Kong people may share in common when visiting other places. (Sandy)

• Hong Kong’s British Legacy Must Be Situated Between a Growing American Influence and Chinese Rule

Every student is, of course, aware of the British influence in Hong Kong, but insofar as we asked questions about reading the United States in Hong Kong, responses did not center on that issue. Nonetheless, students comment that, despite the problems with colonization, they admire the legacy of the British in Hong Kong: the rule of law, the basic practice of honesty, the communications and transportation infrastructure, and the business structure. To some extent they equate all of these with American practices, as well, but they know that America is still more strange, mysterious, and foreign to them than is Great Britain. Even students who are not native Hong Kong Chinese acknowledge this “strangeness.”

Studying among the Hong Kong Chinese about a country that is largely unfamiliar to them, has made me realize just how unfamiliar America is to me. For it is undeniably a foreign country, as much to me as to my fellow students. Americans do have a very different attitude to the British—their “get up and go enthusiasm” and their sense of “can do” is refreshingly different to the staid and formal approach of many British people. I believe it is true that Britain and the US did not separate at the time of the Revolution; instead, it was a gradual process that has been occurring ever since, and was heightened by Britain’s imperial venture. I like to think that in looking at America and the Americans, much of what I am looking at is how Britain, or England, used to be, before the influence of Hanoverian and, later, Victorian pretensions. (Paul, a British student)

• ***The United States and Hong Kong Share Similar Attitudes to Human Rights***

Students are well aware that the United States in the past did not have a strong and positive record of dealing with blacks and other minorities, but they also believe that the United States has changed and become an international model for multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism. They see modern Hong Kong as very positive in this respect, as well, and take for granted the view that people in Hong Kong enjoy the basic freedoms and human rights of the United States, including those of politics and religion.

*Actually, it is difficult to draw any conclusion here because of the differences and contradictions presented. All I want to say is that people of different origins living or growing up abroad should be aware of who they **actually** are and be happy with it, that we must not treat the “mixed” people as aliens and respect their belief in their identities, that we must end discrimination, which is likely to end up with retaliation. It is by so doing that we can feel comfortable to interact with others of different origins and improve ourselves. (Walter)*

Hong Kong, like America, is a place consisting of people from various ethnic or cultural backgrounds. It is worthwhile for us, people living in Hong Kong, to question our identities or cultural backgrounds. (Cately)

I find myself attracted to the US ideals of democracy and freedom. Since my conversion to Christianity I have been

fascinated by biblical precepts such as the doctrine that God loves me and has given His Son for me. (Benjamin)

• ***Hong Kong People Strike a Balance Between U.S. and Chinese Extremes***

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Hong Kong University students, in writing about themselves, acknowledge that the United States is still the “other” for them, something foreign and exotic but still recognizable and familiar, and something which at various times is both attractive and repelling. Combined, however, with the more traditional Chinese culture—or at least their view of the traditional culture—American culture can be beneficial and fruitful, creating the best of many alternatives.

In the study of the US at century's end, my view was broadened by the very contrasting picture of the culture of the United States. In many times, it is an astonishing experience for such a traditional person like me. It not only enriches my knowledge about this pioneer country of the world but it also stimulates me to think about my own culture's strong points and weakness. As a Chinese professor has said. “The solution of humanity can be found between the East and West.” I believe that a balance between these two great cultures is the dream of the human beings. I will try my best to find out more about these two great countries. (Dick)

I find myself in some ways not unlike an American-born Chinese. But I know I am, in the eyes of a Caucasian American, somewhat of a “banana.” However, instead of seeing myself as falling between two stools, I pride myself on being unique and special, having absorbed the “best” from the American and Cantonese cultures, and avoiding their “worst elements.” To many Chinese born in Hong Kong I am incredibly Western, and to Westerners I am usually a unique person about whom they want to seek more information. (Benjamin)

The acceptability of an identity depends a lot on its reputation. “Hong Kong person” is surely a label welcomed by many people, including those who do not originally belong to the city. This identity means hardworking, smart and vigorous. It represents a society, which is the center of the world with economic prosperity and advancement, and its well-known cultural diversity. This feeling is similar to that of people who desire the American identity. Being a citizen of one of the world's leading countries is a sacred status. America is a

democratic country highly praised for its efforts in maintaining global peace and helping the poor in developing countries. The major difference between the two identities is the size and power of the two places. Nonetheless, these will not matter much so long as one is proud to be that kind of person. (Nicole)

I believe that we are Hongkongers rather than Chinese as we all have unique characteristics. For instance, we act as a bridge between mainland China and the western world. Hong Kong people have a very high reputation. Our labor force is very industrious. The entrepreneur is praised for his/her flexibility. . . . For example, Hong Kong people normally work more than eight hours a day, and six days a week. Compared with the working pattern in other countries, say, Canada, the US, Britain and France, I think that they are more "lazy" as I regard the working habit of Hong Kong people as common. (Glorious)

American Studies in Hong Kong

It is the tactics of dealing with and dealing in dominant cultures that are so characteristic of living in Hong Kong. . . . Perhaps more than anyone else, those who live in Hong Kong realize the opportunistic role they need to play in order, not to "preserve," but to negotiate their "cultural identity."¹⁴

Although there are certainly mixed reactions to American studies and U.S. styles of education at the University of Hong Kong, as they seem to have since the beginning of our program, students find American studies one of the few places at the university where they are encouraged to be reflective about the changes in their identities:

"Who am I?" has been a question for me for a long time. It has become clear to me only after the handover of Hong Kong. Having the lectures about identity, researching and writing this essay has provided me with opportunities to figure out my own identity. I realize that I have changed the way of seeing myself in these two years. (Jacqueline)

By looking at strengths and weaknesses of both the United States and Hong Kong in China, students try to come to terms with who they are and what they will contribute to the changing society of Hong Kong. Although they are ambivalent about much in the United States and still hold firm to many of their stereotypes,

they genuinely seem to embrace the opportunity to reflect on issues that are related to comparative U.S. cultural studies and their own lives:

After a prolonged period of self-questioning, puzzling and struggling, . . . the confusion and problems then came to an end. This is something I regard as a very big step in my growing progress because I finally realized that being a unique individual living comfortably with myself is the most important thing. It may not be wise to build up one's confidence based on one's nationality or identity. In fact, our confidence and ability should be rooted in a sense of self-worth and self-sufficiency. Although, my national identity is vague in a sense that it is hard to be fully described by one word, it is not something to be overly worried about. We may then try to explain things in sentences or in paragraphs! Though quite complicated it may be, I recognize, accept and treasure what I have happened to be. (Christie)

After the interview and referring to the materials given in the lectures and from the books, I found that neither the Americans nor people from other countries can be stereotyped as the ideology of the nation changes from time to time. Also I realized the similarity of Hong Kong and the United States in the issue of discrimination, so I sincerely hope that the situation in Hong Kong can be improved. (Li Sau)

All in all, views of self-identity are changing. I think I am turning to a point outside confusion. No matter how others label me, how the environment forces me to think who I am, the important point is how I see myself. I am satisfied with my identity as a Hong Kong person. I have lived here since I was born, I have all my friends and relatives around me. I feel at home only in this place. Then, there is no point in worrying about how others see me. My nationality, in my eyes, is Hong Konger. That is unique to me. I am really glad that I have a clearer direction of identity. In the future, whenever people ask me "Who are you?" I will definitely answer "I am Simone from Hong Kong!" (Simone)

Before I attended the classes in American Studies, I never thought about who I am in the way that most of the Americans do. After reading about individual and group identity in the U.S. in relation to gender, ethnicity, religion, age and race

throughout the term, I now have a better understanding of what “identity” is all about. Most important is that I have finally started accepting being labeled in certain ways because it does not bother me anymore. . . . When reading the articles, I cannot help but think about Bob Dylan, 30 years ago, singing to our parents of his generation; “Don’t criticize what you can’t understand.” These words of a song became the rallying cry for an entire generation, who today treat us with the same lack of respect and understanding that they were subjected to so many years before. I find myself wondering if they can remember being young and misunderstood while struggling to find an identity, as so many of us are today. I also think about all of my hard work at being a good person to all whom I encounter, and if it is even worth it, if my identity is already prejudged by older generations. The fact remains that both sides of this power struggle must have the desire to come together first, before any strides at curtailing the ever-widening generation gap can be made. Both in Hong Kong and in the U.S., teenagers are sometimes not sure which way to follow. It seems like we have no set values, style or pattern of our own. We all wear the same clothes, speak the same language, and listen to the same music. But actually this is a misconception. This generation does understand what “diversity, individuality, uniqueness” are. We do not follow others all the time. We in fact lack changes to demonstrate this to the older generation. But it is okay. We should fight for it. (Connie)

Although it would be premature to argue that the students are a bellwether of future trends, some preliminary and tentative conclusions can be drawn from this exercise. First, Hong Kong students are optimistic about their futures and see themselves as qualified—uniquely so—to bridge the gap between China and the United States. Second, after experiencing significant fear and ambivalence about the PRC in the immediate post-1989 period, they are—as a result of economic reform under Deng, more positive media coverage of the PRC, the influence of parents and grandparents who share a keen interest in teaching their offspring about the complexities of Chinese government, culture, and society, and a smooth early transition to PRC rule in Hong Kong—increasingly comfortable with their ties to the Mainland. Third, despite this acknowledgment and acceptance of Mainland ties, students are adamant about retaining their status as Hong Kong people.

Finally, and perhaps most significant for government leaders in Beijing and Hong Kong, and for those of us interested in the role of American studies and other American enterprises here, these students are selective in their adoption and

adaptation of things American. As recent work in the study of youth culture in Asia, and most recently, James Watson's work on the influence of McDonald's in Asia argues, localization is proving to complicate the easy analysis of globalization or American economic imperialism. Students are anxious to consume certain aspects of American society but savvy about what they will eschew. The fact that they are often rejecting stereotypes rather than realities, and the fact that we all remain uncertain about ultimate outcomes of cultural, political, and economic exchange between the United States and China, means that American studies teachers and students still have plenty to think and write about.

Notes

1. When we asked students if we could quote from their papers for this article, they chose whether or not they wished to be identified by their real names. Some did and others preferred to remain anonymous. Although we have tried to quote directly from the student essays in some cases we have edited for clarity and grammatical consistency. Students often identify the United States as "US" in their essays. Here the abbreviation is "U.S."

2. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. (Hong Kong, 1997), 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 117.

4. At the time of this writing, the teaching core of the Programme in American Studies at the University of Hong Kong includes Gordon Slethaug, Staci Ford, Geetanjali Singh, Eleanor Heginbotham, and Sarah Barnes.

5. Dr. Geetanjali Singh shared e-mail correspondence with one of the students in our core course, "Foundations in American Studies," and both Dr. Ford and Dr. Slethaug had conversations with students as they prepared for exams.

6. *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*. (New York, 1997).

7. "Exceptional" and "exceptionalism" are used here to suggest the notion that the United States was founded on special principles and a spiritual mandate and continues to enjoy a unique and special place in the world because of its origins and development.

8. In Maggie Humm, *Feminisms: A Reader*. (New York, 1992).

9. A banana refers to an Asian (yellow-skinned) who has adopted Western values and perspectives (white on the inside).

10. A British National Overseas passport. This passport does mean the students are citizens of Great Britain, but that they are members of the commonwealth with the right to travel freely in member countries.

11. Almost all the students have extended family in China or know the village from which their family came, and in many cases their parents were born in China. Paradoxically, but politically understandable, those whose parents were born in China may be more concerned about becoming Chinese subjects than those whose families have been here a couple generations.

12. Joann Faung Jean Lee, *Asian Americans: Oral Histories of First to Fourth Generation Americans from China, the Philippines, Japan, India, the Pacific Islands, Vietnam and Cambodia*. (New York, 1991).

13. Windows on the World is a PRC theme park celebrating Chinese history and culture.

14. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Ind., 1993), 25.